

## **Director Stenning, Speaks at BHDDH's Employment First Forum for Providers Serving Individuals with Developmental Disabilities**

**Employment First Forum – March 26, 2013**

I obviously want to thank all of you for attending today. Our intent today is to set the stage for the implementation of the Department's multi-year plan to embrace an Employment First vision for all individuals whom we serve.

Most of you have worked with me in the past and I do not usually prepare written remarks, however it is so important that we be clear today that I have given a lot of thought to my statements.

As you know, some of this work has been expedited due to an investigation by the Department of Justice into violations of the ADA, the Olmstead decision and the Department of Labor standards around minimum wages. Our work at this agency has, by my own admission, been decisive and expedited.

However, we will utilize lessons learned over the next few weeks to better implement Employment First state-wide. Contrary to some rumors, we will not be utilizing an expedited schedule state-wide, but instead will help all of you phase in this important work - based upon the best evidence of meaningful change.

For example, we have already sent out an Employment First policy for new participants as a way to begin to phase in approximately 200 individuals. Unfortunately I have heard that some people have misunderstood that this policy applies to all participants even though I stated in several places that this is for new participants only who became eligible to receive services funded through BHDDH after March 1<sup>st</sup>. Additional copies of this policy were passed out today.

Our next step was to begin to go out and meet with individual agencies – one at a time – to begin a dialogue – starting with those agencies that may have the most difficult transition to make. We have already begun those meetings.

**So, message number one** is that this is going to be a gradual process which will have expected outcomes and expected deadlines.

**Message number 2** is that we expect to work with each of you throughout this process.

As you know, Employment First is included in our Department's Budget presentation for this year. Contrary to some rumors, this is not because it is a budget driven initiative – just the opposite – we are well aware that additional resources will need to be identified over time – from a variety of sources.

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It was included as an initiative in our budget for two reasons – first, because I consider the budget a policy document at heart and this was our first attempt to clearly identify the Department’s major policies going forward – including Employment First, Housing First and Health Homes for example.

Secondly, this allowed us to include Employment First along with Housing as part of the expansion of the 1115 Medicaid Waiver renewal. I was very pleased that OHHS included these initiatives in the application - giving us greater flexibility in recognizing employment and housing as important parts of our delivery system.

So, **Message number 3 is that this is not a fiscal initiative**, it is a policy initiative.

It is based upon three major assumptions – and if you do not accept these three assumptions then you will never be able to be part of the future in this field.

The first assumption is that for every person there is a job. The second assumption is that everyone’s sense of self-worth and dignity is enhanced through employment. And thirdly, we are doing this for all of the right reasons – not just because it is the law, but because it is the correct thing to do for individuals.

**Message number 4 is** that if you do not accept the reasons for doing this as benefitting the individuals whom we serve, then you probably never will be able to comply with our vision.

For example, if you do not agree with this transformation then you will probably not embrace what we call the Individual Placement and Support model and functional assessment of all individuals. This is a powerful evidenced-based model which, if implemented well, can bring about the next stage in opening up opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The time is now for us to stop talking about Employment First and take the steps necessary to implement it. RI was a leader in closing its institutions, yet we are not a leader in insuring that every individual receives non-segregated, totally integrated community involvement in work and other activities. But just as we were behind other states in BH Recovery Systems of Care and yet now we are one of the country’s leaders, so could we again be in DD. But we can only do this with renewed energy from families and with your support and hard work as providers.

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Our work in this area goes to the heart of a holistic approach to working with individuals in terms of independent living, choice and work. It emphasizes the empowerment of individuals with disabilities to maximize employability, attain economic self-sufficiency, independence, inclusion, and integration into their own community.

**Message number 5** is that this is the next true transformation after the closing of the institutions and truly embraces choice and self-determination through integrated employment.

Working with families and individuals towards true integration includes the belief in advocacy and the rights of people with disabilities. Career planning emphasizes integration and inclusion, focusing on the positive assets of people, and assisting them in their pursuit of independence. By moving from a status of dependence to independence through employment or independent living, individuals experience greater empowerment, informed choice and the opportunity to succeed economically.

Our work together will need to address challenges caused by such factors as cognitive and learning difficulties, environmental and societal discrimination and barriers, psychological conflict/distress, or loss of physical/functional ability. But these are challenges that are presented to the individual and we should assist individuals in overcoming these challenges, not accepting these limitations or, even worse, adding to them with our own discrimination.

People with disabilities have many strengths, talents, and abilities including the ability and motivation to work. Research has shown that adults with a developmental disability desire to work and can be very successful at work with support. Supported employment for people with a disability is an evidence based practice approach to vocational rehabilitation that has consistently proven to be more effective than traditional approaches.

The World Health Organization (2000) has recommended that work be used as a way of reintegrating people with developmental disabilities into the community. As well as an income, work provides other benefits such as social identity and status; social contacts and support; a means of structuring and occupying time, activity and involvement; and a sense of personal achievement. Unemployment is linked with increased general health problems.

If you read over the Employment First Policy that I previously sent you and which we have additional copies of here today, you will see the underlying tenants of our vision for each individual.

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In order to achieve the vision outlined in the framework of this Employment First Policy, employment opportunities in fully integrated work settings shall be the **first and priority option** explored in the service planning for working age adults with developmental disabilities in Rhode Island. While all options are important and valued, integrated employment is more valued than non-employment, segregated employment, facility-based employment, or day habilitation in terms of employment outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities. For those who successfully achieve the goal of employment in an integrated setting, future service planning must focus on maintaining employment as well as the consideration of additional career or advancement opportunities. For those not yet achieving employment, annual service planning shall include and reflect employment opportunities as the first and priority service option explored.

I recently reviewed a 12 point white paper which was put together by many of you in this room. I am thrilled that we are on the same page completely with the major points.

First and foremost, we need a clear and common understanding of the principle of one person – one job. We have begun to outline this vision and today's forum was scheduled to be the first provider forum after distribution of our Policy Statement.

We know that this work needs to be evidence based but yet person centered – one size does not fit all. This is why in my December meeting with each of you, I placed so much emphasis on the ISP as being the bible for our work with each individual. We cannot expect to have individuals or families make informed choices if we do not have detailed expectations and assessments for each individual. The only way to move away from center-based services is to truly embrace person-centered planning.

Employment must be customized and job-matching is critical. The assessment, skill building, and job matching will lead to a positive experience which will then lead to true career planning.

But, it has always been my experience that provider and staff expectations are critical. If we feel an individual cannot succeed, then they probably will not – at least not through your agency.

**Message number six is that** Individuals who do best usually are working with staff and agencies who truly believe in them.

We also agree that this transformation will not take place without a lot of hard work on your part and the Department's part. Some of these changes are as difficult for my own staff to accept as it is for yours. But I am committed to partnering with you in this effort.

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We know that we need to greatly increase the variety of opportunities available to individuals. We have begun to take a number of steps to assist you.

For example, as you know, last year the General Assembly passed a BHDDH sponsored set-aside purchasing bill which will greatly expand the number of employment opportunities available to individuals with disabilities through state contracts. Next week the Senate is acting on Governor Chafee's appointments to this new Board and we hope their work will begin shortly thereafter. This will open up a number of state contracts to those of you who have integrated employment services.

We have engaged all of our State partners in discussions of utilizing state and federal resources more directly for employment of people with DD. New MOU's are being developed with other state agencies such as ORS. Discussions have begun with DHS, Medicaid and DLT around existing federal programs such as Ticket to Work, the Sherlock Plan and Disability Employment grants to better serve our populations. By including Employment First in our budget narrative, it puts the weight of Governor Chafee's Office and eventually the General Assembly behind this effort.

BHDDH is the newest state to join the State Employment Leadership Network and we have our first set of deadlines already approaching.

Our new Employment First workgroup brings together a diverse group of state and community agencies – non-profits such as OIC and Amos House, Veterans Groups and the RI Council on the Arts to develop pilots with set-asides for integrated employment for individuals with DD.

**Message number seven** is that we need to work with you to expand the variety of experiences in a systematic manner based upon real market data.

We obviously agree that outreach to families and our community partners is paramount. As you know, we recently conducted 11 family forums and the attendance was encouraging and very positive. We have developed a new participant packet by partnering with RIPIN.

**Message number eight is that** we need a renewed voice and energy from the kitchen tables and living rooms to make this happen with a new set of names that will be remembered in the next chapter outlining the journey out of darkness. This civil rights movement needs to be embraced by parents and individuals.

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As we do a state assessment of our State's readiness to do this work, each of you needs to do a self-assessment. We need to look at workforce development, training, job skills, best-practices, etc. We are already looking at new job definitions and adjustments to the ones that we added last year to support not only job development and creation, but job matching and job retention.

**Message number nine is** we must be honest with this assessment and be willing to change. Staff may have to be retrained and a shift in staff focus will be necessary.

Lastly, it is critical that we focus our attention specifically on new participants and individuals aging into our system. They cannot be allowed to enter into segregated settings with limited career planning and potential. This was the reason for our New Participants policy and is also the reason why it is critical that each of you talk to your local school departments. Young people with disabilities must enter our system assuming they will have comprehensive opportunities and choices and not be limited by age old thinking.

**Message number ten is** our first leap forward can be with the next new participants in our system.

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